



MR BALDWIN HAS EATEN A GOOD LUNCH AND IS HOPEFUL
IT IS DENIED THAT THE ALBERT MEMORIAL HAS BEEN WRECKED
THERE WILL BE SEVERAL TRAINS TOMORROW AND THE OTHER
SIX MILLIONS OF YOU CAN WALK

THE BRITISH GENERAL STRIKE 1926

Margaret Morris

G. 82
THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
1973

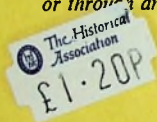
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by

MARGARET MORRIS

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1926

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THE BRITISH GENERAL STRIKE 1926

'The General Strike is a challenge to Parliament and is the road to anarchy and ruin.' (Stanley Baldwin, Prime Minister, 6th May 1926).

'The General Council does not challenge the Constitution . . . The sole aim of the Council is to secure for the miners a decent standard of life. The Council is engaged in an industrial dispute.' (T.U.C. statement, 7th May 1926).

* * *

ON Saturday, 1st May 1926, miners throughout Britain found themselves locked out of the pits until they would agree to substantial wage reductions. The coal-owners had first threatened to take this action nine months earlier but it had been averted by the granting of a Government subsidy and the setting up of a Royal Commission to study the difficulties facing the coal-mining industry. The subsidy was timed to expire on 30th April 1926. Early in March the Commission, under the chairmanship of Sir Herbert Samuel, produced its proposals for the reorganization of the industry, but, even if carried through, they would take time to yield benefits. In the short term, the Commission's Report supported the owners' case for some reduction in wages but opposed their demands for longer hours or the replacement of a national wages agreement by district agreements; it also advised against the continuation of the Government subsidy. Baldwin announced that the Government would play its part in putting the Commission's recommendations into effect provided that the two sides in the industry would come to terms on the lines of the Report. This proviso proved to be the stumbling block: negotiations between the Mining Association, representing the owners, and the trade union Miners Federation ended in deadlock because reorganization was not acceptable to the owners, nor wage cuts to the miners. No better result was achieved at a meeting of the two sides convened by the Prime Minister on 22nd April, nor in a whole series of flurried, last-minute negotiations bringing in representatives of the Government and the General Council of

the Trades Union Congress. The final breakdown came at about an hour before midnight on 30th April. By this time many of the lock-out notices had already been put into effect.

Several hours before the final breakdown the Government decided to react firmly to what was clearly an impending crisis. In the late afternoon of 30th April a Privy Council meeting was called to proclaim a state of emergency under the 1920 Emergency Powers Act. The official Supply and Transport Organization, originally set up in 1919 to deal with essential supplies and services during strikes and tuned up during the preceding nine months, was to be activated as from midnight.¹

The T.U.C. was the last of the participants to take up an actual battle stance at this time, although it can be argued that the original challenge had been its decision in July 1925 to place an embargo on the transport of coal in the event of a lock-out. It was this threat which had induced an obviously reluctant Government to grant its nine-months subsidy. This was seen as a victory by trade unionists and 31st July 1925 became known as 'Red Friday'. Since then, however, the T.U.C. had made no preparations for further direct action in defence of the miners, and after the publication of the Samuel Report it concentrated on trying to promote fruitful negotiations. When this proved in vain and the crisis date was approaching without a settlement, a conference of trades union executives over 800 strong was convened in London. They stood by from 29th April onwards. Finally, faced with the news that the coal owners were refusing to suspend their lock-out so that negotiations could continue, and that the Government in lieu of further mediation had already declared a state of emergency, this conference voted by an overwhelming majority (3,653,527 to 49,911) to take strike action in support of the miners. This decision was taken on Saturday afternoon, 1st May, and came into effect during the night of 3rd/4th May.

The speakers at the conference took meticulous care to avoid the use of the emotive term 'a general strike', which traditionally in the British Labour movement* had revolutionary overtones.

* *N.B.* - The term 'labour movement' is used to cover all working class organizations and related bodies: i.e. the trade unions, the Labour Party, the various socialist and co-operative societies, etc. The term 'Labour' was common usage at the time to denote both the Labour movement and the working class in general.

What was planned was not, in fact, a universal shutdown but a large-scale, selective, sympathetic strike in a number of key industries: transport of all kinds, printing and the press, iron and steel, metals and heavy chemicals, building (except for houses and hospitals), electricity and gas. The T.U.C. described its plans as 'co-ordinated industrial action' or used the term 'a national strike', but such semantic niceties, although loaded with significance and meaning in trade union circles, failed to register outside. Both at the time and ever since, the stoppage which began on the 4th May 1926 has been called 'The General Strike'.

The calling of the strike brought into the open a deep chasm in outlook within British society. The vast majority of manual workers felt a bond of brotherhood with the miners. Mining was dangerous, unhealthy, dirty and arduous. Figures quoted in the Samuel Report showed that two out of every hundred men going down the pits would be killed within twenty years and another twenty-five seriously injured or crippled by industrial diseases.² No-one, it was argued, should be asked to face this for less than a living wage. Since 1921 most workers had faced wage cuts, and, although prices were also falling, the average standard of living among wage-earners was lower in 1926 than it had been in 1921,³ and only marginally better than at the beginning of the 20th century. This fall in the standard of living was made acutely painful by the fact that wage cuts involved a sharp and immediate reduction in the money available for spending, whereas price reductions took place only gradually. Wage-earners, therefore, were alarmed and on the defensive; they remembered that it was following the defeat of the miners in their last major struggle in 1921 that wage cuts had become general. Thus sympathy for the miners was allied to the belief that their wages set the trend for all workers.

It seemed quite legitimate to most trade unionists that they should use the main method they had of asserting power, the withdrawal of their labour, as a response to the lockout of the miners. But such a decision was not taken lightly: men going on strike were not only sacrificing their immediate wages, they were also risking their promotion prospects and even – for it was a period of high unemployment – their jobs. Trade union officials were aware of the risk to funds carefully collected over

many years. So it was a solemn moment at the conference of trades union executives when the vote for the strike was announced. It fell to Ernest Bevin of the transport workers' union to voice the spirit of those present:

'... you have placed your all upon the altar of this great Movement, and having placed it there, even if every penny goes, if every asset goes, history will ultimately write up that it was a magnificent generation that was prepared to do it rather than see the miners driven down like slaves.'⁴

That such feelings were shared by the rank and file was shown by the overwhelming response to the strike call. When the strike began on 4th May the railway system was virtually immobilized; in most big towns only a few pirate buses were operating and hardly any trams; docks and ships stood idle; most newspapers failed to appear; some power stations and gas works were closed, while others were only kept open by naval ratings; iron and steel works damped down their furnaces and building workers downed tools. Non-unionists came out along with members of the unions, and some workers in trades not in the T.U.C.'s first list, such as engineers and textile workers, came out on their own initiative. Each union involved was responsible for calling out its members and for organizing picketing and strike pay, but in most localities strike committees or councils of action, mainly based on trades councils, were set up to coordinate activities. They ran meetings, printed local strike bulletins and distributed the T.U.C.'s newspaper, *The British Worker*, maintained communications with T.U.C. headquarters and other nearby committees, sent out supplementary pickets, dealt with cases of distress or arrest, provided entertainments and sports, and gave permits allowing the movement of food or essential supplies past pickets. Looking back, A. J. Cook, secretary of the Miners Federation, wrote with emotion and gratitude, 'What a wonderful response! What loyalty!! What solidarity!!! From John o' Groats to Land's End the workers answered the call to arms to defend us, to defend the brave miner in his fight for a living wage'.⁵

Yet, ironically, outside the manual working class the General Strike turned attention away from the plight of the miners and itself became the issue. Few people, at least in the big towns, were not affected in some way. For many managerial and office

staff the chief preoccupation was with the difficulties of getting to work. Baldwin claimed that the trade unions were not entitled to attack the whole community in this way and that such action was entirely different from an ordinary strike: it was an attempt to usurp the power of Parliament and undermine the Constitution. He would not be bullied into giving subsidies or carrying out policies which he conceived to be against the national interest. Winston Churchill, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, called the strike, 'a deliberate, concerted, organized menace', aimed at holding up the nation to ransom, and warned of the danger of 'a Soviet of Trade Unions' taking over the economic and political life of the country. In the opinion of the Government, the T.U.C. had outlawed itself and there could be no truck with any of its members until the strike was unconditionally called off.

There was widespread support for the Government's stand. Thousands of people volunteered to man the services disrupted by the strike or to serve as special constables; car-owners everywhere carried out minor strike-breaking activities such as offering lifts or delivering goods. The volunteers seem mainly to have been professional men of all ages, retired army officers, young men from the Stock Exchange and City finance houses, office workers and University students. Some manual workers joined the volunteers but, despite the existence of a million unemployed, not many: the volunteers were predominantly middle class. Some were in search of a light-hearted adventure or a break from routine. Some were railroaded into volunteering by employers or University authorities. Others undoubtedly believed that they were defending their liberties against a Bolshevik revolution and saw the T.U.C. as a pawn in the hands of a small tyrannical group out to seize power. Readers of the *Daily Mail*, which managed to circulate a Paris-printed edition, imbibed this view every time they opened their papers and Churchill, as editor of the Government's strike newspaper, *The British Gazette*, inserted reports of speeches by himself and others on the same lines. Among sections of the middle class there had always been a latent hostility to working-class aspirations and a resentment of trade unionism:⁶ the call for volunteers provided such sections with a chance, as they saw it, to put the workers back in their place.

Not all of those who criticized the T.U.C.'s action in calling

the strike, however, were callous to the miners' problems or in agreement with the Government's handling of the crisis. On the contrary, there was a body of moderate middle-class opinion, typified by the Archbishop of Canterbury, which called on the Government to compromise, extend its subsidy until a solution had been found and take the initiative in reopening negotiations, so that the strike and the lock-out could be simultaneously called off.

Even among those directly involved on both sides there were gradations of attitude. Within the Cabinet, Baldwin was deeply committed to a belief in compromise in industrial relations and his Minister of Labour, Sir Arthur Steel-Maitland, was also on the side of restraint; but there was a powerful group of intransigents of whom Winston Churchill was the most belligerent, closely supported by Sir William Joynson-Hicks, Home Secretary; Neville Chamberlain, Minister of Health; the Earl of Balfour, Lord President; W. Bridgeman, First Lord of the Admiralty; and Sir Douglas Hogg, the Attorney General.

The General Council of the T.U.C. also had its 'left-wing' and 'right-wing', although its members were elected by trade groups with more weight attached to seniority and length of service than to political views, so that the divisions were far from clear-cut and even the men on the left owed their position to skill in negotiation and not just militancy. A. A. Purcell of the furnishing trades union had belonged to the Communist Party during the first two years after its formation in 1920 and was still sympathetic both to the Party itself and to the National Minority Movement, a rank and file trade union pressure group formed under the influence of the Communists in 1924. A. B. Swales of the engineers, Chairman of the T.U.C. in 1924-5, and G. Hicks of the building trade workers were also regarded as on the left, as were Ernest Bevin, then just coming into a position of influence on the Council and an extremely forceful, class-conscious, trade union militant, and Ben Tillott also of the transport workers union. The majority of the Council were on the right and very strongly inclined towards caution. The most prominent personality was J. H. Thomas, M.P., secretary of the railwaymen (N.U.R.) and Colonial Secretary in the 1924 Labour Government; he was supported by J. R. Clynes, M.P., of the general workers union (N.U.G.M.W.), Lord Privy Seal in the 1924 Government. The Chairman of the T.U.C. at

the time of the strike represented the quintessence of moderation – Arthur Pugh of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, described by a contemporary observer as ‘a capable man of business’ who ‘could have made a fortune as a chartered accountant’.⁷

Historians have found it very difficult to see in the members of the General Council the potential revolutionaries of Churchill’s imagination. Their deeds speak for themselves: after the vote to organize a sympathetic strike was taken on the 1st May, the first action of the Council was to ask the Government to reopen negotiations so that the strike could be averted. Talks began that evening and continued until late on Sunday evening, 2nd May, when they were broken off by the Government on the grounds that a strike had already begun at the *Daily Mail*. This was a reference to a spontaneous action by the printworkers there who had refused to print a leading article attacking the trade unions. The Council knew nothing about it and felt unfairly dismissed. As its report rather forlornly described the position: ‘the General Council had no option but to proceed with the strike programme on which the Conference had decided.’

* * *

Nine days after the general strike began, at noon on Wednesday, 12th May, the General Council submitted to the Government’s demand for unconditional surrender. The strike was called off without any commitment on the Government’s part and without even the customary assurance that there would be no victimization of the returning strikers. This surrender led to bitter recriminations from many of the rank and file and severely disappointed the miners, who remained locked-out. Indeed, the calling off of the general strike is remembered as one of the most traumatic moments in Labour history.

The decision was taken after discussion with Sir Herbert Samuel, Chairman of the Royal Commission. Returning from abroad on 6th May, Samuel hastened to offer his services to Baldwin as a potential mediator, but the Government was adamant that no official recognition could be given to negotiations while the strike lasted. Nevertheless, Samuel met some of the T.U.C. leaders and discussed with them provisional

terms for a settlement of the mining dispute. He suggested that the miners ought to be willing to accept some temporary wage reductions if, before the reductions became effective, concrete steps were taken to begin reorganizing the industry. Samuel made clear that he was acting on his own initiative and had no understanding either with the Government or the coal-owners, but promised to urge the Government to renew its subsidy and reopen negotiations if the strike were called off. A memorandum summarizing these discussions was drawn up and on Tuesday, 11th May, formally accepted by the General Council. The miners, however, were not willing to accept the Samuel Memorandum and urged the need for safeguards before calling off the strike. The Council brushed aside these objections and refused either to revise or postpone its decision.

Despite Sir Herbert Samuel's warnings that he had no authority to commit the Government, the Council apparently suffered from the delusion that by calling off the strike they were entering into a gentleman's agreement with the Government to implement the Samuel Memorandum. A speech made by Baldwin on the radio on Saturday evening, 8th May – that is, during the period of back-stage meetings with Samuel – may have influenced the Council's thinking. Baldwin said:

'A solution is within the grasp of the nation the instant that the trade union leaders are willing to abandon the General Strike. I am a man of peace. I am longing and working and praying for peace, but I will not surrender the safety and the security of the British Constitution. You placed me in power 18 months ago by the largest majority accorded to any Party for many years. Have I done anything to forfeit that confidence? Cannot you trust me to ensure a square deal, to secure even justice between man and man?'

The fact was, however, that Baldwin was in no way tied to the Samuel Memorandum and, after the strike was called off, no more was heard of that document. Ernest Bevin said quite frankly that the Council had made 'the biggest bloomer' over the Samuel Memorandum, although J. H. Thomas always maintained that if only the miners had not rejected the Memorandum all would have been well and the Government would have been morally obliged to act upon it.

Two days after the strike ended, Baldwin produced his own proposals for settling the mining dispute, and put them before

the Mining Association and the Miners Federation. The new proposals were a modified version of the original Samuel Commission Report, with the offer of a further transitional subsidy thrown in as bait. Neither side would budge. Indeed, both owners and miners seemed even less inclined to compromise than they had been during the last negotiations before the general strike began. The lock-out continued. Baldwin's next tactic was to extend the hours worked each day from seven to eight in the hope that this would induce the owners to make concessions acceptable to the miners on wages and reorganization. The Eight Hours Act was passed on 8th July 1926 but the owners made no concessions. Baldwin's remaining credibility as a mediator was severely damaged in the eyes of the miners. The lock-out continued.

As the summer wore on, the mining dispute turned into a war of attrition. There was much poverty and hunger among the miners and their families. The condition of pregnant women and those with young children was often pitiful and a committee for collecting a relief fund was set up. Reports reaching this committee revealed the terrible limitations of the official help given by the Poor Law guardians: women were found on the verge of child-birth without food or proper clothes or bedding.⁸ The fund distributed well over £300,000 and was supported by people from all walks of life. The Prince of Wales, the future Edward VIII, sent a donation of £10 and a letter written on his behalf:

'H.R.H. necessarily cannot take sides in any dispute; but we all owe a debt to the miners in the past, and everyone feels sympathy for their wives and children in their hour of distress. Besides, it would be an unsatisfactory end to any dispute that one side should have to give in on account of the sufferings of their dependents. H.R.H. is confident that with goodwill on both sides there will be a happy issue out of the present difficulties.'⁹

The Prince's confidence was to prove misplaced: there was to be no happy resolution of the crisis. The Government tried yet again in the late summer and early autumn to bring about a settlement, but without success. Some miners, mainly in the Nottingham area, drifted back on the owners' terms. The majority of the miners held out stubbornly while the Federation

tried desperately to get better terms from the owners, most of whom wanted even fiercer wage cuts than demanded in the prosperous Nottingham district. In late October over four-fifths of the men employed in the mines were still out, but by the end of November the Federation was forced to capitulate. It was a total defeat. Wages were fixed on a district basis instead of a national one and were drastically cut, the 8-hour day had to be accepted and all hope of reorganization was lost.

* * *

The General Strike is often depicted as the logical, although rather delayed, culmination of an epoch of strikes and class antagonism which began before the First World War and was renewed with even greater vigour after the war ended. Membership of trade unions rose from 2½ million in 1910 to 4 million in 1914, 6½ million in 1918 and reached a peak of 8½ million in 1920. Strikes were increasingly national in scale and the number of working days lost was exceptionally high in 1912 and 1919-1921¹⁰. Some progress was made in overcoming the sectional tendencies of the unions: there was a trend towards amalgamation among unions in the same field and the three biggest unions or federations – the Miners Federation, the National Union of Railwaymen and the National Transport Workers Federation – formed a Triple Industrial Alliance in April 1914.

Fears that the growth of the Labour movement would bring about the disruption of the existing order of society were frequently expressed from early in the 20th century. What was particularly worrying for the opponents of change in the political or economic structure was the interaction from 1910 onwards of industrial militancy with socialist ideology. The syndicalists, who advocated the use of a general strike to bring about the overthrow of capitalism, were seen as the greatest danger. The term syndicalist is of French derivation but the concept of the general strike as an instrument for revolutionizing society originated in Britain. It is usually traced back to William Benbow: the idea was not entirely new when formulated by him in his pamphlet, *The Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* (1832) but he clarified it and made it more widely known. It was taken up by the Chartist

movement but after the collapse of an attempted general strike in 1842 the idea was discredited. Very little was heard of the theory in Britain during the rest of the 19th century, but it was developed abroad, particularly in France and the U.S.A. It returned early in the 20th century and gained ground after Tom Mann became its British apostle in 1910.

The syndicalists ridiculed the idea that socialism could be achieved through political parties or through parliament. They said it could only be achieved by the workers building up powerful trade unions, with a single union covering each industry, until the unions were strong enough to organize a general strike. Such a strike would leave the existing rulers of the country and owners of industry powerless: in the words of James Connolly, 'When that industrial republic is fully organized it may crack the shell of the political state and step into its place.'¹¹

The influence of syndicalism on trade union developments before the war was exaggerated at the time by both politicians and the press. Historians who have recently studied the Triple Industrial Alliance have stressed the pragmatic reasons for its formation. Industry was amalgamating into bigger units, so in order to hold their own the unions had to cover a wider field; prices were rising and real wages were lagging behind; and it was necessary to anticipate the fact that strikes by any one of the big three had immediate repercussions on employment in the other two. While syndicalist visions may have inspired some of the men involved, only a tiny minority of the initiators of the Alliance considered its purpose was to bring about revolutionary change.¹²

Conservative and Liberal politicians both before and after the war failed to understand that the traditions of the trade unions and their political wing, the Labour Party, tended to make them a stabilizing influence. Their approach was essentially moderate and non-revolutionary: discontent was channelled towards the achievement of limited gains by means of established procedures. Despite the moves towards amalgamation, there were over twelve hundred separate unions, each jealous of its own autonomy. They had an empirical approach to the reasons for their existence and were mainly geared to immediate, one-by-one, struggles over wages and conditions of work. Trade union officials needed to become experts on the technical problems of

negotiating piece-work rates and factory codes; in the six years before the First World War between three and four hundred of them moved over without difficulty to minor civil service posts in the Board of Trade or the National Insurance Departments.¹³ Such men had both eyes and both feet firmly on the ground and their election to trade union office is as good an indication as any of the temper of the movement.

The political aspirations of the trade unions were likewise modest and this remained true even after the setting up of the Labour Representation Committee (the forerunner of the Labour Party) in 1900. Up to and during the First World War the party worked in very close harness with the Liberals, making little independent impact. From 1918, armed with a new constitution and a new socialist policy,¹⁴ the Labour Party became the main Parliamentary opposition. In the debate on the King's speech at the opening of the new Parliament, Walter Adamson speaking for Labour said, 'We have reached that stage when the working classes of the country will refuse longer to continue to be treated as cogs in the machinery for mere profit-making purposes'.¹⁵ The Labour M.P.s called for the nationalization of land, mines and railways. They were a small minority in the House of Commons, however, and this restricted their effectiveness.

Many of the supporters of the Labour Party outside Parliament were impatient with this situation. The way in which the 'Coupon Election' of 1918 had been rushed through was seen as a manoeuvre by Lloyd George to hold on to the premiership. It had handed over real power to a Conservative Party increasingly dominated by businessmen and employers.¹⁶ Ernest Bevin said, 'The election is an attempt to snatch power before democracy is properly organized.'¹⁷ The time-lag before the results could be challenged by a new election was seen as justification for turning to extra-Parliamentary 'direct action' and strikes.

The First World War had an immense psychological impact on the men who took part in it. Lloyd George spoke of a revolutionary spirit permeating the whole of Europe. In Britain there was a mood of self-assertiveness among both returning soldiers and civilian workers. Gone was the pre-war tendency towards deference and humility. Men now were convinced that they were entitled to fair treatment and were

prepared to act to get it. It is significant that both unemployed hunger marchers and strike-pickets in the inter-war years often wore their war-medals.

As the war neared its end, anti-war feeling and the inspiration of the Russian Revolution added strength to the appeal of socialism. Tremendous crowds turned out for socialist speakers and among large masses of workers the idea of socialism was winning emotional support. Yet membership of the organized revolutionary bodies was still small and at the most critical moment, the immediate aftermath of the war, the socialists were still divided both organizationally and over tactics. The Socialist Labour Party and the Clydeside shop-stewards' movement were influenced by syndicalist ideas and had no time for the Labour Party. In contrast, the British Socialist Party, the main Marxist group, was affiliated to the Labour Party and had established working links with sections of the Independent Labour Party, the largest organization among the socialists. The B.S.P. was no longer antagonistic to industrial action as it had been earlier (its original leader, H. M. Hyndman, once said, 'Can anything be more foolish, more harmful, more, in the widest sense of the word, unsocial than a strike . . . ? I have never yet advocated a strike.')18 Nevertheless, the B.S.P. still emphasized the priority of political action.

An attempt to bridge the tactical differences and form a single socialist party took place in December 1918 but it foundered. This objective was not achieved until July 1920 with the formation of the Communist Party. After much internal conflict the new party agreed that it ought to apply for affiliation to the Labour Party, but it was turned down. This meant that although the revolutionary groups had been brought together, they were more isolated than before from the main working class political organization, the Labour Party. In 1925 the right-wing leaders of the Labour Party succeeded in outlawing even individual Communists from participation as delegates from trade unions in Labour Party conferences.

The essential weakness and lack of co-ordination of the forces working for revolutionary change are more evident now looking back than they were at the time. Similarly, the Labour Party seemed at the time a bigger danger to the established order than it was later to prove to be. Indeed, how to handle the challenge of 'Labour' became an almost obsessive concern of

the leading Conservative politicians.¹⁹ They were particularly alarmed at the success of the 'Hands off Russia' movement. Both the Labour Party and the T.U.C. officially backed this campaign. In the summer of 1920 a new intervention was threatened in aid of the Polish attack on Russia. A 'Council of Action' was formed at a joint meeting of the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C., the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Labour Party, and a national delegate conference on 13th August decided on a general strike and the setting up of local councils of action. At this point the Government withdrew its threat of intervention, declaring that the situation had changed. As might be expected, it denied that it was yielding to the pressure of the Labour movement but the latter remained convinced that its threats had been the deciding factor.

The whole weight of the trade unions and Labour Party was never used with similar determination and unity to force through policies relating to Britain, not even on the question of the nationalization of the mines, universally agreed to be a priority. The miners had a deep-seated hatred of the coal-owners and even before the war had demanded nationalization. The industry was extremely inefficient and fragmented; the fact that the Government had to take over the mines in the war was seen by the miners as acknowledgement of their case that private enterprise was incapable of running the mines efficiently. In February 1919 a ballot vote among the miners showed overwhelming support for a national stoppage for higher wages, shorter hours and nationalization. Stocks of coal were low and the miners' position was extremely strong: almost every part of the economy depended on coal and the miners had the country at their mercy. The Government offered a Royal Commission to examine their case and appealed to the miners not to use their power. The Commission was accepted; it recommended increased wages and a 7-hour day, and, by the casting vote of the Chairman, Justice Sankey, the nationalization of the mines.²⁰ Bonar Law said the Government would carry out the Commission's recommendations both in the letter and in the spirit. Wages and hours were dealt with immediately but, after the strike was called off, the issue of nationalization was postponed for further consideration until, finally, in August 1919 Lloyd George admitted that the Government had no intention of carrying it through. Vernon Hartshorn, one of the miners'

M.P.s, told the House of Commons that the miners would say, 'We have been deceived, betrayed, duped.'

The key question was what the miners and the rest of the Labour movement intended to do about it. The answer was to launch a moral and propaganda campaign to educate the public on the case for nationalization. This was the turning point: after this decision the Government was safe from any real danger of direct action being used to force through structural change within British society. Strikes continued at a high level until 1921, but their objective was to defend living standards against post-war inflation, not to reinforce political demands.

The beginning of depression and mass unemployment from December 1920 onwards weakened the trade unions and undermined their bargaining position. By 1926 membership of trade unions was down to 5½ million. The coming of the depression is often seen as marking the end of the period when the Government were threatened with 'direct action' by a self-confident, self-assertive Labour movement, but in fact it was the post war boom not the slump which opened the way for the Government to run the country on the basis of Conservative ideas. Not only did the boom turn the trade unions towards a short-term policy of chasing the cost of living instead of making long-term demands, it also opened the way for the abolition of economic controls and the handing back of enterprises taken over during the war to their private owners. In boom conditions it could be argued that there was absolutely no need of Government intervention in economic affairs. Even in the field of social policy, it was during the boom that the scope of post-war reconstruction was most drastically reduced compared with earlier plans.²¹

The Government had been very frightened of the situation in the immediate aftermath of the war: they had expected a long depression and thought that the interaction of a mood of revolt with unemployment among demobilized soldiers could be really dangerous. By the time serious depression actually came, however, the steam had been taken off the mood of rebelliousness and the pattern of peace-time society had been set. The Government's confidence that they were now in control was shown by the decision to hand back the coal mines to the owners in March 1921. The owners immediately posted up

notices cutting wages. The miners appealed to the other members of the Triple Industrial Alliance for help and a sympathetic strike was promised. However, at the last minute, it was called off, on the day known in trade union history as 'Black Friday' (15th April 1921).²³ After this, it was only a matter of time before the Triple Alliance was buried and with it hope that the Labour Movement was strong or united enough to alter the balance of power within Britain.

It might have been thought that any lingering fears among the Conservatives about there being a potentially revolutionary situation would have been dispelled by J. R. MacDonald's first premiership, which demonstrated very clearly that, despite the Labour Party's new socialist policy, its leaders were most anxious to abide by the existing political rules and conventions. MacDonald made no move to end surveillance of militant trade unionists and socialists by the Special Branch nor to interfere with the Supply and Transport Organization. On the contrary, the Government prepared to make use of the latter and invoked the 1920 Emergency Powers Act against the transport workers' union – to the intense resentment of Ernest Bevin.²³ MacDonald's attitude is best illustrated by his comment on 'Red Friday': 'The Government has simply handed over the appearance, at any rate, of victory to the very forces that some, well-considered, well-examined socialists feel to be probably its greatest enemy.'²⁴ In the House of Commons on 3rd May 1926, the eve of the general strike, MacDonald announced, '... with the discussion of general strikes and Bolshevism and all that kind of thing, I have nothing to do at all. I respect the Constitution as much as Sir Robert Horne'.²⁵

The anxiety of the General Council to avoid using the term 'general strike' when preparing to support the miners shows that most of its members shared MacDonald's assumption that general strikes should be equated with 'Bolshevism and all that kind of thing' and were to be avoided at all cost. The Council had certainly no desire to take over the running of the country nor even to force a General Election. The Government must have been well aware of this situation but they were alarmed at the possibility of the official leaders losing power to militants with a more revolutionary outlook. Such fears were not confined to the extremists like Churchill or Joynson-Hicks. The problem was taken seriously by even the less excitable members of the

Party such as J. C. C. Davidson, who wrote in his draft memoirs:

'We were at this time particularly worried about revolutionary activities in the country . . . The Communist Party in this country was small . . . but we thought it was gaining in strength and we knew that by consistently taking the lead in industrial disputes it could gain a secure hold on certain parts of the trade union movement. We were particularly worried by the strength of the minority movement in the mining industry and by the attempts to organize the unemployed. Committees of Action had been set up in many factories and trade unions, factory newspapers were used to influence workers, and demands were made for more nationalization and increased unemployment pay. MacDonald's failure to act, and the mounting unemployment figures while the Labour Party had been in office, made for a growing disillusion in the Labour movement that was dangerous . . .'²⁶

The disillusion mentioned by Davidson was certainly widespread. Ernest Bevin forecast that there would be a major upheaval if there was not a recasting of the values on which society was based in the next five years. Bevin believed that it would not be accomplished without industrial strife, 'There must, I fear, be an assertion of power before the new values are recognized'.²⁷

There was a revival of militancy in the trade unions in 1924/5 and moves were set on foot to form an Industrial Alliance on the lines of the earlier Triple Alliance, but on a larger scale and with better defined procedures for making decisions. The National Minority Movement was also gathering strength. The strategy of the N.M.M. was to work inside the official trade union movement, not to become a breakaway group. The N.M.M. supported the formation of the Industrial Alliance, but was more enthusiastic about proposals to give additional powers to the General Council. This reflected a certain confidence in its ability to win the official movement for militant policies.

Despite these developments there can be little doubt that the Labour movement as a whole was less cohesive and less challenging in 1925-6 than it had been in 1919-21, and that there was no immediate cause for Conservatives to feel alarmed about the trends at work within society unless they themselves took action to exacerbate class feelings.

* * *

The Conservative politician with the most accurate assessment of the political and social tendencies within British society was probably Baldwin himself. Much of his understanding came from his experiences as an ironmaster. He felt he knew British workmen and could rely on their sound common-sense and willingness to be reasonable if treated fairly. His trust was combined with paternalism: he assumed that his judgement on the best way to deal with any new problem would be accepted.

Baldwin had a distaste for extremists and this included those in his own party; he was very critical of those Conservatives who wanted to launch deliberate attacks on the trade unions and he said in relation to the Taff Vale judgement, 'The Conservatives can't talk of class war: they started it.'²⁸ His sincerity was vouched for by his long record as a kind and reasonable employer: in 1912 he had been able to say '... during the twenty years I have been directly responsible for the management of a large number of men there has never been any question of a lock-out or strike. I can hardly imagine any circumstances under which I would be a party to a lock-out on a large scale.'²⁹

When he became Prime Minister Baldwin set out to reconcile the different elements within society. In the spring of 1925 he faced and won a battle against a sizeable section of the Conservative Party which introduced a Bill attacking the political levy paid by the trade unions to the Labour Party. Baldwin persuaded the Cabinet to withdraw it as a gesture of goodwill to Labour.³⁰

The extent of the difference between Baldwin's outlook and that of the more aggressively-minded Conservatives should not be exaggerated: it was a tactical difference, a question of approach, not a strategic difference. Baldwin was a Tariff Reformer but was extremely orthodox on all other matters of economic or constitutional theory. He opposed state intervention in industry, believing that management was the task of the employer, not the state. The fact that during the war the Government had found it necessary to direct most of the industrial and economic enterprises of the country in order to mobilize resources efficiently, did nothing to shake his belief that private enterprise needed to be unfettered. In this he was typical of most politicians and economists.³¹ Leaving the war aside, there had been occasional portents of the concept that

'the national interest' in economic affairs justified new measures of state intervention. For example, in 1902 a subsidy was given to the Cunard company to prevent British shipping falling into American hands, and in 1912 an Act fixing minimum wages in the coal mines had been introduced to prevent the 1912 strike dragging on and crippling all of British industry, but these were mere straws in the wind and their theoretical significance for the future was not recognized. All that was acknowledged was that the Government had an interest in industrial peace: machinery to give expression to this was set up by the 1896 Conciliation Act and the 1919 Industrial Courts Act. These Acts, however, still left the responsibility for reaching agreement in the hands of the employers and unions: they were only aids to collective bargaining, not substitutes for it.

Baldwin was the first Conservative Prime Minister to be faced with a problem which is still causing heart-ache to Conservative Governments – namely, what to do about declining industries: prop them up or let them go under? It is against the best long-term economic interests of the country to put resources into an industry which is no longer viable and cannot compete in world markets. Yet there are powerful strategic, economic and social reasons for not allowing some industries to die. The social cost in terms of unemployment and consequent political disaffection may be too high. There may be a danger of becoming too dependent on foreign imports for a raw material that is vital to other industries or essential in time of war. There are balance of payments considerations, and the question of whether it is socially just to prop up a declining industry by paying low wages. Such problems and considerations continue to vex governments today when many of the industries concerned are already under public ownership, but they are even more difficult to resolve when industry is privately owned and there are vested interests at stake.

The problem facing Baldwin, moreover, was the decline of Britain's major industry. The coal mines employed over a million men and supplied the fuel on which most British industry depended. Coal was slowly being displaced by oil and electricity, but the shrinkage in the home market was only marginal at this time. It was the export market which was failing; this was very serious because before the war nearly a third of the output had been exported. The British

industry was antiquated and inefficient; it could not compete with more modern industries abroad. On top of this, the Dawes Plan had flooded some of the markets previously held by Britain with cheap coal as part of German reparations. Finally, Britain's return to the gold standard in April 1925 had made her exports even less competitive: how far sterling was over-valued is still a matter of debate among economists but there is a strong case that it was by about 10 per cent.³²

The inefficiency of the industry was largely a result of the system of ownership: the Samuel Report showed that there were about 2,500 coal mines divided between 1,400 coal owners. Many mines were too small to be efficient and many of the owners lacked will or capital to modernize. As the Sankey Commission Report had stated earlier, 'the present system of ownership and working in the coal industry stands condemned, and some other system must be substituted for it'.³³

There were great regional disparities in the industry. The new rich seams of South Yorkshire and Nottingham were far more profitable than the older ones, such as those of the Lancashire & Cheshire or Durham districts. The Yorkshire and Nottingham pits also had the advantage of serving mainly the home market. South Wales, heavily dependent on the export market, was especially vulnerable to the difficulties of the industry.

The Samuel Report advised in favour of rationalization and the reorganization of the industry into larger, more viable units. It rejected nationalization except of coal royalties. Some of the larger owners, led by Sir Alfred Mond, were in favour of reorganization, which they wanted linked to a market-sharing cartel. Most of the members of the Mining Association, however, were bitterly opposed to it except on a voluntary basis. The Samuel Commission recognized that state direction would be needed: left to itself the industry would stagnate, with the brunt of the difficulties being passed on to the miners in the form of lower wages and longer hours.

Baldwin accepted this part of the Samuel Report with reluctance: both the nationalization of coal royalties and forced amalgamations were alien to his economic creed. Faced with the coal crisis, he preferred to put into the scale his own good example and hoped by sheer moral force to steer the coal owners and the miners into accepting their responsibility, as he

saw it, to work out a solution between themselves. It was virtually inevitable that he should fail. As Beatrice Webb acidly commented, 'What is wanted is to face the facts with knowledge and determination. *Goodness* – i.e. diffused sympathy – is beside the mark. In a great crisis these sloppy emotions rouse irritation or contempt . . .'³⁴

Baldwin's handling of the General Strike and the miners' lock-out has provoked considerable controversy. He has been praised for calm statesmanship or accused of weakness and indolence, and of losing control of the Cabinet to the intransigents.³⁵

The balance of power within the Cabinet was always delicate. The first challenge Baldwin faced was over the granting of the subsidy on 'Red Friday'. He regarded this subsidy as a concession: as he told a T.U.C. delegation in April 1926, 'they were mistaken if they thought I had granted the subsidy out of funk. I did it because I am a pacifist, but if you push a pacifist too far he can be very combative and obstinate. They were not to think the country's money was going to be poured out indefinitely.'³⁶ Baldwin seems to have been afraid of the Conservative back-benchers rejecting his policy. Tom Jones described him as white and nervous when he rose to justify the subsidy in the House of Commons, but when he sat down 'it was abundantly plain that the Government was in no sort of danger and that the Prime Minister's frankness had once more triumphed.'³⁷ Within the Cabinet, Baldwin's difficulties had been eased by the argument that the road transport preparations, vital to the functioning of the Supply and Transport Organization, were not ready.³⁸ Part of the Cabinet protested, but they were realists. All they could demand was that the position be remedied immediately. And so it was. Cabinet meetings on the 5th and 7th August 1925, less than a week after 'Red Friday', made all the necessary decisions.

Baldwin saw it as his constitutional duty to be ready to face a showdown with the unions, but he always hoped for a negotiated settlement. The extremists, on the other hand, wanted revenge for the Government's capitulation, as they saw it, on 'Red Friday'. There were no disagreements, however, during the nine months of the subsidy. Baldwin agreed that the emergency preparations, both official and the ostensibly unofficial ones of the Organization for the Maintenance of Supplies,³⁹ should

go ahead. Nor is there any indication that he opposed the arrest of the Communist leaders in October 1925, Joynson-Hicks's special contribution to being prepared.

The 2nd May 1926 was a critical day for Baldwin and a weakening of his hold on the Cabinet does seem to have taken place then. Baldwin wanted to continue negotiations with the T.U.C. to the last minute, but he was forced to call them off. The significance of this, however, should not be exaggerated: Baldwin's ascendancy was diminished but he was far from handing over to Churchill. One of his considerations in handling the Cabinet was to make sure that, if a trial of strength with the unions could not be avoided, he should, himself, maintain control of the conduct of the Government during the confrontation.

Neither fate nor the T.U.C. secretariat were on Baldwin's side on the 2nd May. The sheer inefficiency of the secretariat caused endless muddle: they failed the previous evening to check that a message to the miners' offices announcing the T.U.C.'s resumption of negotiations with the Government reached A. J. Cook; and on that fateful Sunday, they failed to let the Cabinet know in advance that the miners' executive had left London and that negotiations would have to be delayed until they came back. The result was, as one of the Cabinet said, 'we kicked our heels for hours'. Impatience, exasperation and feelings of outraged dignity at being made to wait by the T.U.C. were tipped into the scales against Baldwin before the actual negotiations began at 9 p.m. Even at that hour the T.U.C. still could not guarantee that the miners would accept the formulas that were being proposed. Most of the Cabinet, including Lord Birkenhead, its main negotiator, thought the miners would reject the Governments' demand that the need for wage reductions be explicitly recognized. The T.U.C. negotiators left to try to get the miners to accept a formula agreeable to the Government. While they were gone, news of the *Daily Mail* incident reached the Cabinet. This was the last straw in the eyes of the intransigents. They wanted a fight and the *Daily Mail* issue was a convenient pretext. Baldwin acquiesced.

It is less remarkable that Baldwin should have felt forced to give way this time than that he had been able to take the Cabinet along with him so far. The bulk of rank and file

Conservatives both in the constituencies and in Parliament wanted the Government to stand firm and show the T.U.C. who was master. One of the pressures on Baldwin on 2nd May was an interview with an extremely anxious Chief Whip. In theory, the power to decide policy is vested in the leader of the Conservative Party, but, as leaders who try to direct policy along paths contrary to the wishes of the mass of the party have found, there is a difference between theory and practice.⁴⁰ It was only three and a half years earlier that Austen Chamberlain's leadership had been rejected at the Carlton Club meeting of 19th October 1922. Baldwin, moreover, was regarded by many of the established elite within the Party as an upstart who had taken advantage of the crisis in 1922. To add to this, Baldwin had precipitated and then lost the tariff reform election of 1923.

By 1925-6, however, his position was stronger: he had proved to be a great electoral asset to the Party and had succeeded in healing the old breach by bringing in Austen Chamberlain as Foreign Secretary. What was more, there was no ready-made alternative. Austen Chamberlain was content to be Foreign Secretary; Churchill certainly had ambitions, but his position was still very weak among the Conservatives whom he had only just rejoined. Baldwin could have a certain confidence in his power to sway the Cabinet provided he put forward clear-cut policies. His trouble on 2nd May was that he did not have a tangible proposal: he was merely asking for patience while he went on trying for a settlement, although he had failed to achieve one up until then, despite having had over a month since the Government agreed in principle to act on the Samuel Commission Report. This was the weakness in his position and the breakdown of the hairbreath negotiations on 2nd May should not be regarded as an isolated turning point.

Baldwin was certainly very unhappy. On the eve of the strike he warned the House of Commons that Britain was nearer civil war than for centuries past. Some commentators have interpreted this remark as mere rhetoric, an attempt to undermine the strikers. Perhaps it was partly that, but it also reflected his fear that the situation would get out of hand and lead to violence and bloodshed. He was determined to prevent the Government provoking violence and always claimed that

the cleverest thing he did was to tie up Churchill as editor of *The British Gazette*. He also won his way over leaving the B.B.C. independent, or at least nominally so.⁴¹ Members of the army and the navy were both used as strike-breakers, and there was a show of force at the docks in support of food convoys, but major clashes were avoided.

Popular accounts of the strike have perhaps exaggerated the orderliness prevailing during the strike and the good relations between police and strikers. Trams were overturned, windows broken and buses immobilized by removing vital engine parts. There were police baton charges against pickets or gatherings of onlookers. The T.U.C. received many complaints about provocative and violent behaviour by special constables. Many people were injured and the number and extent of violent clashes was accelerating in the last days of the strike. Yet the total number of such incidents was small in relation to the 4 million workers on strike. Only just over 3,000 arrests were made and over half of those were for political offences under the Emergency Powers Act. The relative calm can be credited to Baldwin's leadership as well as to the common-sense and restraint of the strikers.

The unconditional surrender of the T.U.C. after nine days restored Baldwin's prestige – indeed, it probably never stood higher than at that moment. He was seen as the pilot who had safely steered Britain through the rocks.⁴² As the months went by and no way was found of getting the pits open again, this prestige was slowly whittled away, and Baldwin began to be regarded as weak and ineffective.

His first biographer, G. M. Young, attributed his failure to deal with the mining dispute to a mood of exhaustion and nervous collapse after the general strike itself was called off. Young also quotes an anonymous colleague who said 'as soon as the strike began, Baldwin was a passenger.'⁴³ This interpretation has been challenged by his more recent biographers, who successfully show that he continued to put a great deal of effort into trying to solve the dispute throughout the long months of the lock-out, absenting himself from the problem only during periods of stalemate which he thought could be best overcome by the passage of time.⁴⁴ Effort alone, however, could not solve the dispute.

A more trenchant criticism is that his actions increasingly

favoured the coal owners and that he failed to sustain his integrity as a fair and impartial mediator. The miners were very bitter about the passing of the Eight Hours Act. They also felt betrayed over the failure of the Government to insist on a national settlement as recommended by the Samuel Commission. The owners had always aimed at separate district agreements.

Even the normally loyal Tom Jones contrasted the way the owners and the miners were received at Downing Street: 'Ministers are at ease at once with the former, they are friends jointly exploring a situation. There was hardly any indication of opposition or censure. It was rather a joint discussion of whether it were better to precipitate a strike or the unemployment which would result from continuing the present terms.' This was said about a meeting on the 23rd April when Baldwin was committed to trying to get the owners as well as the miners to implement the Samuel Report. Already at that stage the owners' representatives were demanding longer hours, although this was quite contrary to the Commission's findings, and, indeed, economic nonsense in a situation where the market was flooded. Instead of delivering a stern lecture to the owners, Baldwin let it pass. That evening he and Steel-Maitland dined at the Travellers' Club with Evan Williams, chairman of the Mining Association, and Lord Weir, a leading industrialist.

No-one has ever had a good word to say for the coal-owners or their leaders. It was almost impossible to negotiate with the Mining Association because if they did not like a proposal, they retreated to the argument that they could not compel their members to accept: power resided with the district associations, not at the centre. Sir Alfred Mond volunteered his services to Baldwin both before and during the general strike to help him find a solution,⁴⁶ but he rejected the offer. While the T.U.C. on 2nd May made valiant efforts to lead the miners towards an agreement, and very nearly succeeded, Baldwin never came near to achieving the situation where the owners would agree to a settlement acceptable to the miners. He seems never seriously to have tried. In short, he shared too closely the owners' outlook and assumptions to be able to carry through his assumed role of impartial arbitrator.

Baldwin's failure to achieve a settlement of the dispute completely undermined his influence. In May 1927 he bowed

to pressure from his followers and passed the Trade Disputes Act. This made sympathetic strikes illegal, limited picketing, made the collection of the political levy more difficult and ended the affiliation of Civil Service Unions to the T.U.C. Such legislation in pursuit of class warfare was a denial of all he had set out to do.

* * *

Reading the debate at the T.U.C.'s 'inquest' conference on the General Strike held in January 1927 makes one think of a group of film makers who, having made a bad film, run it through again and again, peering at it myopically to spot the exact moment where they went wrong. The miners singled out a statement made by the T.U.C. on April 8th which failed to condemn all wage cuts, together with its lack of advance preparations for a general strike, as the beginning of its retreat; they saw both the re-opening of negotiations on 1st May and the beginning of the talks with Samuel as going behind their backs, and, finally, they claimed that calling off the strike was a desertion of the miners and contrary to the conference decision to support their stand. The General Council's spokesmen said that it was the miners' failure to abide by their agreement to hand over the conduct of the dispute to the Council which had led to their defeat, and implied that the miners with their slogan 'Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day' had been unrealistic, obdurate and pig-headed. Not at the conference, but on other occasions, J. H. Thomas declared that the root of the problem had been that A. J. Cook was a wild and woolly socialist.

All trade union leaders during negotiations have to have two faces, one for rallying their members and one for negotiating. The accusation against the miners' leaders that they were mere sloganizers at all times can now be seen to be quite unjust. One indication of their realism is that they were prepared to settle for reorganization on the lines of the Samuel Report, although what they really wanted was nationalization. A. J. Cook's main strength as a trade union leader lay in his complete identification with the miners. It was said of him, that however tired or hoarse he was, in a few words he could electrify a meeting of miners: 'he was the burning expression of their anger at the iniquities which they were suffering'.⁴⁶ But his

head was not lost in the clouds. Tom Jones records a discussion with him on 15th April 1926 when he said, 'we are economically in the weakest position we have ever been, and while a lot of our chaps don't agree with me, we shall have to have a national minimum not only with pluses above it, but minuses below it.' Herbert Smith, President of the Miners' Federation, was implicitly admitting that the miners would have to concede something on wages when he told the T.U.C. that he would be prepared to go through the Samuel Report page by page to secure a settlement.

The essence of the miners' case was that if reorganization were carried through there would be no need for wage cuts. They believed that the industry could recover its viability. The maintenance of the 7-hour day was seen as essential to keep unemployment to the minimum. Wages were so low among the less well-paid miners that there was really very little room for manoeuvre, and feelings among the mass of the miners were very strong. All major decisions of the Miners' Federation had to be put to a vote of the entire membership and the leaders would not have been able to carry support for more than minimal concessions on wages linked with a total package including immediate reorganization. The miners felt that they had been cheated in 1919 over nationalization and were on guard against any repetition of such treatment. Pugh, the chairman of the T.U.C., understood this and explained to Baldwin in a private interview on 25th April the need to start with reorganization, not wages, if he wanted the miners' co-operation.⁴⁷

It might well be thought that Pugh could have done a little more to see that the General Council carried out his own advice. On May 1st, the miners agreed to hand over the conduct of their case to the Council but they made clear that they expected the Council to consult them. Herbert Smith outlined the position: 'You have acted conscientiously with us up to now, and we have handed this thing over to you, of course functioning in this business along with you. We are offering nothing except the revolver, and the revolver in this instance is the tongue. We want to be able to give advice and to take advice, and mind that there is no mistake either from our side or the other side. We would not ask you people to come in with us unless we asked you to share in these negotiations.'⁴⁸

Yet almost immediately relations between the miners and the T.U.C. began to deteriorate. In part, this was due to a failure in communications, as on the evening of 1st May when Cook discovered by accident that the T.U.C. leaders were meeting the Government. The two miners who were members of the Council did not attend, one because of ill-health and one in the belief that he ought to stay in Scotland. Neither Cook nor Smith were members. They were allowed to attend but, even so, things took place which they only found out about by chance or at a late stage. It is hard not to sympathize with their feeling that this was more than mere accident: J. H. Thomas's antagonism to Cook was such that, putting the best complexion on it, he would not have bothered to check up on the efficiency of the T.U.C. secretariat to see that Cook was being kept fully informed, and over the back-stage talks with Samuel the miners seem to have been deliberately excluded until a very late stage.⁴⁹ With the memory of 'Black Friday' in the background, this was bound to provoke distrust among the miners.

The T.U.C. leaders wanted to avert the General Strike but, if that proved to be impossible, they were anxious that the responsibility for the breakdown in negotiations should be clearly seen to rest with the Government. The miners' leaders tried to co-operate. On 2nd May, even after the Government called off negotiations, Bevin took the lead in devising a new and more comprehensive plan which was accepted by Cook and Smith; the miners' executive, however, voted by twelve to six to reject this, but the possibility of the T.U.C. and the miners finding an agreed formula could not at that stage be ruled out. Bevin handed MacDonald details of what was happening for him to use in the House of Commons on the 3rd May, but MacDonald failed to do so. Bevin thought that if he had done, public opinion would have forced the Government to reopen negotiations. Yet there was still a very long way to go before a solution was in sight. The negotiations on 1st and 2nd May were merely negotiations about a formula on which real negotiations, including the mine owners and the miners, could begin. The miners were worried that the T.U.C.'s anxiety to find this formula was in danger of prejudicing their position in the real negotiations. The T.U.C., however, thought it essential to keep negotiations going and, as the Government insisted on

recognition that there must be wage cuts, that it was better to be flexible on this than to end in deadlock.

The miners certainly lost by their break with the T.U.C. over the Samuel Memorandum. It is easy to understand their feeling that they were being rushed and inadequately consulted, and, of course, they were right in their assessment that the T.U.C. had not obtained safeguards either for the miners or the returning strikers. There was extensive victimization in some industries, including the railways, and this was only modified by strikes against victimization on 13th and 14th May and by Baldwin's pleas for peace. Victimization was made easier because, with the pits still shut, the level of economic activity throughout the country was very low and the labour force reduced. The miners were not the only victims of the failure of the T.U.C. and the miners to act together.

The fissure between the miners and the General Council was obviously the main thing which went wrong. There were, also, weaknesses in the running of the strike which were discussed at the inquest. Confusion was caused by unworkable directives from T.U.C. headquarters, usually arising from a desire to be responsible and not take any action which would hurt vulnerable sections of the community. Originally, the T.U.C. offered to co-operate with the Government over the distribution of food, but this was rejected. There were muddles over permits to move food or use transport, and over which sections of the building workers or the power workers were to come out. Another criticism that was made was that calling out the printers was a mistake as it gave the Government a free run on propaganda through the B.B.C.⁵⁰ It is doubtful, however, if the weaknesses of organization had much effect on the outcome. The lack of advance preparation by the T.U.C. left the field open to local initiative and, indeed, the overwhelming and spontaneous response to the strike call is evidence of a great talent among the rank and file for organization and innovation.

More important than whether the strike could have been better organized is the question of whether the Council's reasons for calling it off were adequate. To justify themselves, some of the Council argued that the strike was beginning to break by the time it was called off, but such a claim was quite contrary to the T.U.C.'s own intelligence reports.⁵¹ All later assessments have agreed that the return to work was on a very

small scale.⁵² Some areas and some industries were better than others, both in solidarity and the effectiveness of their organization – the North East was particularly well organized – but the general situation was very good.⁵³

The General Strike was, in fact, becoming increasingly effective in halting industrial production. Even factories not directly involved were closing down for lack of raw materials or transport. On the other hand, the country was learning to live with the strike, and the Government had the distribution of food under control. If it had continued, some Council members feared that tempers would get frayed and a dangerous situation might arise, but even the increase in violent incidents at the end of the strike was hardly sufficient evidence to justify such fears. Nor does it seem to have been true that the strike was falling into the hands of revolutionaries. In short, none of the arguments that calling off the strike was a matter of urgency can now be substantiated; there could have been time for the T.U.C. to explore the terms for ending it with the miners, instead of snatching at the Samuel Memorandum, regardless of their disagreement.

At the inquest debate, it was the practical details that were discussed, not the theoretical question of whether the strike could have been utilized to secure a better outcome. A couple of speakers said that they thought calling the strike in the first place had been a mistake. J. H. Thomas always saw threats of strikes as being valuable only as bluff. There was no attempt to debate this seriously. A fatalistic attitude reigned: that the strike had been forced on them, that they had had to go ahead and that they had had to call it off.

The Council had been unanimous in deciding to call off the strike on the basis of the Samuel Memorandum and this unanimity was maintained at the inquest conference despite the fact that the original vote was taken under a misapprehension and the outcome had been so unsatisfactory. The left-wing members accepted their share of responsibility for what had been done and did not put the blame on the final negotiating sub-committee led by Thomas. This certainly influenced the vote: the Council's report was accepted by 2,840,000 votes to 1,095,000.

The general strike of 1926 was certainly not a revolutionary act, but neither was it a simple industrial dispute. Only if the Government had intervened by additional subsidies or by

coercing the coal owners could the difficulties of the coal industry have been solved in some other way than at the expense of the miners. The general strike, therefore, was a political strike and needed to be pursued as such if it was to make any progress. The case was strong: the crisis in the coal industry, after all, had been officially diagnosed again and again as needing drastic remedies, and the acute crisis of 1925-6 was the immediate result of two political acts by the British Government – the signing of the Dawes Plan and the return to the Gold Standard. Yet no attempt was made either by the T.U.C. or the Labour politicians to mobilize public opinion behind a demand that the Government, having partly created the problem, must take responsibility for solving it. J. H. Thomas specifically declared against a prolonged subsidy. The difficulty was that, although MacDonald and the Labour Party had a theoretical commitment to nationalization as a solution, they thought that this was too advanced a demand in the existing political situation. Leaving nationalization aside, they had just as orthodox a view as Baldwin of the role of the state in economic matters – as their failure to deal with unemployment in the second Labour Government was to demonstrate.⁵⁴

By 1926 the Labour leaders were also extremely orthodox on constitutional questions. The threat of a general strike over intervention in Russia in 1920 had been boldly issued, but the Labour leaders now saw such a method of putting pressure on a Government in favour even of a limited change of policy as unwarranted. They did not go so far as to say it was actually unconstitutional, but MacDonald tried to hold back Sir H. Slessor, the Labour ex-Attorney-General, from challenging statements to that effect by Sir John Simon. The overwhelming defeat of Labour in the 1924 election after the Zinoviev letter incident⁵⁵ had been seen by MacDonald as absolute proof that the electorate was against Communism, and he assumed that they would also be against a general strike. Indeed, by this time he thought that strikes of any kind were vote losers.⁵⁶ The great difference between 1920 and 1926 was that in 1920 there was unity within the Labour movement, and the Labour leaders would have been glad if a general strike had forced the Government to call an election, but in 1926 they had no confidence at all that the electorate would respond.

* * *

The failure of the general strike in 1926 to help the miners left behind a mood of frustration within the ranks of the Labour movement. Trade union membership had already suffered a severe drop following 'Black Friday' and the onset of chronic mass unemployment; in 1926 a further half-million were lost and by 1927 less than five-million members remained. Even more weakening than the loss of members was the distrust between different unions and the widening of the gap between the leadership and the rank and file. The National Minority Movement more and more saw the official trade union leaders as their main enemy, so that the role of the movement became divisive.

The legacy of bitterness, disunity and defeatism, allied to the continuance of large-scale unemployment, was to keep the trade union movement weak and on the defensive for most of the remainder of the inter-war period. Some historians claim that the long-term effects of the strike were beneficial. The strike cleared the air, it is argued, and opened the way for a fresh start in industrial relations: it gave both employers and workers a better sense of reality and taught them that more was likely to be achieved through co-operation than through confrontation. Similarly, it is said that the episode disabused the working class of any lingering hopes that direct action could be used to achieve political ends and rightly redirected their attention back to the Labour Party and Parliamentary elections; there would in future be respect for the normal democratic procedures and constitutional practices of Britain. Such an interpretation ignores the deep scars left by the episode on the Labour movement.

The government's inability to solve the mining dispute and the economic hardship caused to many industries because of the long lock-out convinced some of the more open-minded industrialists that they should seek to develop direct links with the trade unions in the interests of industrial peace. As the failure of the general strike had caused a loss of confidence in the use of industrial action among the General Council, most notably in the case of Ernest Bevin, previously one of its strongest advocates, the Council agreed to meet these industrialists and the 'Mond-Turner' talks opened a new phase in the history of industrial relations. The progress that this represented, however, may have been somewhat over-estimated and it has to be remembered

that the talks involved only the top leadership of the unions and took place only in some industries.

Distrust of intervention by the government in industrial disputes was already deeply embedded in trade union thinking – the Taff Vale case was but one instance among many where the trade unions had felt that the power of the state was being used against them. The fact that Baldwin promised to bring peace, but then passed the Eight Hours Act and failed to force concessions from the coal-owners, helped to deepen this distrust. Its legacy has remained a vital force in post Second World War politics as the Government found in trying to operate the 1971 Industrial Relations Act. The imprisonment of five dockers under this Act goaded the T.U.C. General Council in July 1972 to threaten to call a general strike. It was averted, but it was the first time the threat had been made since 1926.

By the end of the First World War the structure of the British economy was unbalanced, with far too great a dependence on the old staple industries. The inter-war period saw great progress in the development of new industries, especially in the Home Counties and the West Midlands, with improved standards of living for the majority of the working class. The life of the workers in the declining industries situated in the depressed areas, however, lay in a tragic triangle bound by low wages, unemployment and despair, enlivened only by the agitation for better unemployment benefits. After 1926 hope was lost that the power of the trade union movement could be used to force the Government into accepting responsibility for alleviating this misery in a positive way. Only successful pressure from below could have done this. The Government's economic theorists had nothing to offer: nationalization was seen in the context of socialism and so automatically ruled out; while the arguments for an extension of the role of the state within a basically capitalist economy were not even argued coherently until the Liberal Yellow Book of 1928, and were then not accepted.

It was the absence of any possibility of finding an agreed solution to the difficulties in the mining industry which made a confrontation on the lines of the General Strike almost inevitable, not any generalized will to class conflict. Even if the last-minute negotiations had succeeded in averting a strike in May 1926, the problem would have remained unresolved and the crisis must soon have recurred.

The Labour Party is often regarded as having gained in the aftermath of the General Strike. For one thing, the Liberal Party split apart once more over the strike, with Lloyd George taking a moderate, conciliatory line and Asquith condemning it. For another, the gap that seemed to be opening up between the Labour Party and the Trade Union leaders during the 1924 Government was closed. The vote of the Labour Party in 1929 was certainly increased and the Conservatives lost support. Yet the Labour Party faced the problem that its own left-wing was very disenchanted with the leadership. It would seem, too, that the failure of the strike encouraged the Labour leaders to lower their sights even further in relation to what was immediately possible. The Second Labour Government was formed in 1929, but it ended in disaster in 1931. It was not until after the Second World War that a Labour Government was elected with the will and power to repeal the 1927 Trade Disputes Act and to nationalize the coal mines. Among the reasons for the election of that Government in the landslide victory of 1945 were memories of the General Strike and a determination among trade union voters to wipe out the disappointment and frustration of its failure.

Notes

1. Cabinet Minutes. P.R.O. CAB 23/52.
2. *Report of the Royal Commission on the Coal Industry* (1925), Cmd.2600, vol. i, p. 192.
3. D. H. Aldcroft, *The Inter-War Economy: Britain 1919-39* (London, 1970), p. 364 table 41.
4. T.U.C. Report of a special Conference, *The Mining Situation* (1926), p. 34A.
5. A. J. Cook, *The Nine Days* (London, 1926), p. 16.
6. See, for example, C. F. G. Masterman, *The Condition of England* (London, 1909), chapter iii, 'The Suburbans'. The First World War had modified but not eradicated such attitudes.
7. Hamilton Fyfe, *Behind the Scenes of the Great Strike* (London, 1926), p. 31.
8. Marion Phillips, *Women and the Miners Lock-Out* (London, 1927), pp. 47f. An attempt to deny that there was distress in the coalfields made by the N.S.P.C.C. and others, including Baldwin, at the time of the Fund's American appeal, seems to have been flying in the face of reliable evidence: see *ibid.* pp. 60-3.
9. *Ibid.* pp. 20-21.
10. See H. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (Penguin Books, 1963), statistical table.

11. Quoted in S. & B. Webb, *History of Trade Unions* (London, 1920 edn.), p. 656.

12. Philip Bagwell, 'The Triple Industrial Alliance, 1913-1922', *Essays in Labour History 1886-1923*, ed. A. Briggs & J. Saville (London, 1971); and G. A. Phillips, 'The Triple Industrial Alliance in 1914,' *Econ. Hist. Review*, second series, vol. xxiv, no. 1 (1971), pp. 55f. See also, R. Page Arnot, *The Miners: Years of Struggle* vol. ii (London, 1953), pp. 114-5.

13. E. Halevy, *History of the English People, 1905-15* (London, 1934), p. 439.

14. See G. D. H. Cole, *History of the Labour Party since 1914* (London, 1948), pp. 44f.

15. *Parl. Debates*. 11th Feb. 1919.

16. See J. M. McEwan, 'The Coupon Election of 1918 and the Unionist Members of Parliament', *Jnl. of Modern Hist.* 1962, pp. 302-4.

17. Quoted in A. Bullock, *Life & Times of Ernest Bevin*, vol. i (London, 1960), p. 90.

18. Quoted in W. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-1921* (London, 1969), p. 29.

19. Their reactions are examined in depth in M. Cowling, *The Impact of Labour, 1920-24* (Cambridge, 1971).

20. For a summary of the Report, see R. Page Arnot, op. cit. pp. 189f.

21. For a thorough examination of this question, see Paul B. Johnson, *Land Fit for Heroes* (Chicago, 1968).

22. For details, see P. Bagwell, op. cit. pp. 117-125 and A. Bullock, op. cit. vol. i, pp. 167-174.

23. A. Bullock, op. cit. vol. i, p. 241.

24. *Manchester Guardian*, 4th August, 1925. Quoted in J. Klugman, *The General Strike, 1925-6* (London, 1969), p. 33.

25. Horne was a leading Conservative politician, a past Chancellor of the Exchequer, although no longer in the Cabinet.

26. R. R. James, *Memoirs of a Conservative*, pp. 227-8 (See bibliographical note).

27. A. Bullock. op. cit. vol. i, p. 253.

28. K. Middlemas & J. Barnes, *Baldwin* (London, 1969), p. 99.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

30. His speech to Parliament on this theme is often seen as his best. It is printed in Stanley Baldwin, *Collected Speeches: On England* (London, 1926) or see *Parl. Debates*, 6th March 1925.

31. See R. H. Tawney, 'The Abolition of Economic Controls, 1918-1921' *Econ. Hist. Review*, 1943.

32. See D. E. Moggridge, *The Return to Gold 1925* (Cambridge, 1969).

33. For details see *Coal Industry Commission 1919*, Reports I (Cmd. 359) and II (Cmd. 360).

34. *Beatrice Webb's Diaries, 1924-32*, ed. M. Cole (London, 1956), pp. 90-91.

35. As, for example, in *The New Statesman*, 22nd May 1926.

36. T. Jones, *Whitehall Diary* vol. ii, (London, 1969), p. 14. (See bibliographical note).

37. *Ibid.*, vol. i. p. 327.

38. Cabinet Minutes, P.R.O. CAB 23/50.

39. The best term for the O.M.S is semi-official. It was set up with

Government co-operation, but co-ordination with the regional Commissioners was erratic, as a Home Office memorandum reveals: P.R.O. HO 45/12336.

40. See R. McKenzie, *British Political Parties* (London, 1955), chapter iii.

41. See R. R. James, *op. cit.*, pp. 246-50. For an analysis of how broadcasting helped the Government during the General Strike, see A. Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting* (London, 1961), pp. 360f.

42. As in a cartoon in *Punch*, 26th May 1926.

43. G. M. Young, *Stanley Baldwin* (London, 1952), p. 116.

44. K. Middlemas and J. Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 418.

45. P.R.O. LAB 27/6 and T. Jones, *op. cit.* vol. ii, pp. 17-18.

46. A. Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel* (London, 1960), p. 72. For a more critical assessment see Lord Citrine, *Men and Work* (London, 1964), p. 210.

47. T. Jones, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 22.

48. T.U.C. Report, *The Mining Crisis and the National Strike 1926*, debate 1st May 1926.

49. Lord Citrine, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

50. See K. Martin, *The British Public and The General Strike* (London, 1926).

51. T.U.C. Library. Reports of the General Strike Intelligence Committee.

52. See W. H. Crook, *The General Strike* (Chapel Hill, 1931), p. 423, and an official assessment made in retrospect within the Ministry of Labour: P.R.O. LAB 27/9.

53. For details of the organisation of the strike in the localities see E. Burns, *The General Strike, May 1926: Trades Councils in Action* (London, 1926); A. Mason, *The General Strike in the North East* (University of Hull, 1970); and D. Baines and R. Bean 'The General Strike on Merseyside, 1926', *Liverpool and Merseyside: Essays in the Economic and Social History of the Port and its hinterland*, ed. J. R. Harris (London, 1969).

54. See R. Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump* (London, 1967).

55. For a summary of recent historical writing on this incident, see C. L. Mowat, *Great Britain since 1914* (London, 1971), chapter viii.

56. T. Jones, *op. cit.*, vol. ii, p. 15.

Bibliographical Note

It is perhaps surprising that no recent historian has produced a comprehensive review of the General Strike. The fullest and most impartial account remains that of an American professor, W. H. Crook, *The General Strike* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1931). This book is a comparative study of various strikes in different countries which have earned the cachet 'general strike', but most of the attention is focused on the British experience in 1926. Professor Crook travelled in Britain collecting oral evidence and made use of the contemporary published material such as the T.U.C. Reports, *Parliamentary Debates*, newspapers, etc. He made a study of the railway companies' records to check the effectiveness of the strike, and generally checked and cross-checked wherever he could. This book is now difficult to obtain even through libraries, but later writers have been able to incorporate its material.

The most useful and detailed of the general accounts easily available is the chapter on the General Strike in C. L. Mowat, *Britain between the Wars* (London, 1955). Professor Mowat makes clear the various comings and goings in all the different sets of negotiations and pin-points what were the matters at issue. One weakness in an otherwise excellent account is a confusion in the use of the terms 'strike' and 'lock-out': these are technical terms denoting a stoppage of work initiated by workers and employers respectively. The miners were not on strike in 1926, they were locked out.

The volume in the Oxford History series by A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Oxford, 1965) deals trenchantly but surprisingly briefly with the General Strike and needs to be read alongside one of the fuller accounts. Readable popular histories, full of stories of human interest, are Julian Symons, *The General Strike* (London, 1957), which has the disadvantage for historians that the sources are not cited, and C. Farman, *The General Strike, May 1926* (London, 1972), which uses much of the newer material and gives its sources.

Some of the contemporary writings are reasonably accessible. Four of these are invaluable for their factual detail: R. Page Arnot, *The General Strike* (London, 1926); E. Burns, *The General Strike, May 1926: Trades Councils in Action* (London 1926) and R. W. Postgate, E. Wilkinson and J. F. Horrabin, *A Worker's History of the Great Strike* (London, 1927), all dealing mainly with the trade union side, together with George Glasgow, *General Strikes and Road Transport* (London, 1926), which describes the Government's Supply and Transport Organization. The T.U.C. collected together its various reports and debates on the crisis and published them under the title, *The Mining Crisis and the National Strike, 1926*. The two special newspapers issued during the strike, the Government's *The British Gazette* and the T.U.C.'s *The British Worker*, can sometimes be found in the original or can be studied side by side in a recently published facsimile edition (pub. David & Charles, Newton Abbot, 1971).

Four members of the General Council wrote autobiographies giving their version of events: J. H. Thomas, *My Story* (London, 1937); Ben Turner,

About Myself (London, 1930); J. R. Clynes, *Memoirs* (London, 1937), and Margaret Bondfield, *A Life's Work* (London, 1949), and so did the then secretary of the T.U.C.: Lord Citrine, *Men and Work* (London, 1964). This last work is far the most useful. A. J. Cook, the miners' leader, published his side of the matter in a small pamphlet: A. J. Cook, *The Nine Days* (London, 1926), and further light on his attitudes and those of other miners is found in the autobiography of one of his friends, another South Wales miner and later secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Horner: A. Horner, *Incorrigible Rebel* (London, 1960), and in the official history of the union: R. Page Arnot, *The Miners: Years of Struggle*, vol. ii. (London, 1953). Alan Bullock, *The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin* vol. i. (London, 1960); the second volume of the official history of the Communist Party: James Klugman, *The General Strike 1925-6* (London, 1969), and R. Martin, *Communism and British Trade Unions: A Study of The National Minority Movement* (Oxford, 1969) help to clarify the role of different trends in the trade union movement during the strike, Sir Herbert Samuel also described his part in the events: Viscount Samuel *Memoirs* (London, 1945).

On the Government side neither Baldwin himself nor any of the other key figures wrote his memoirs. Several of the Cabinet left extensive private papers, however, which has eased the task of their biographers – K. Feiling, *Neville Chamberlain* (London, 1946) and the two biographies of Baldwin – G. M. Young, *Stanley Baldwin* (London, 1952) and the recent and much fuller one, K. Middlemas and J. Barnes, *Baldwin* (London, 1969) – are particularly useful. Much new information is available from two recently published contemporary accounts – the diaries of Tom Jones: Thomas Jones, *Whitehall Diary*, vol. ii, 1926–30, ed. K. Middlemas (London, 1969), and the papers of J. C. C. Davidson: R. R. James, *Memoirs of a Conservative: J. C. C. Davidson's Memoirs and Papers, 1910-37* (London, 1969). Tom Jones was Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet and J. C. C. Davidson was junior minister at the Admiralty and was made Deputy Chief Civil Commissioner in charge of Government publicity during the strike, but both of them were on terms of personal friendship with Baldwin which brought them closer to him than their official positions alone would suggest – the Baldwins and the Davidsons, for example, spent many holidays together. Another advance for historians of the strike is that the Government's records for the period are now open and also help to fill out the picture of what was going on behind the scenes on the Government side.

There is an urgent need to build up as much detail as possible of the sociology and organization of the strike while some of the eye-witnesses are still available. Unfortunately most of the work already done on local studies of the strike is buried away in local newspapers, university theses or rather obscure journals, but a study of the strike in the North East was recently published: A. Mason, *The General Strike in the North East* (University of Hull, 1970). It can be hoped that more such studies will emerge soon and that an attempt will be made to correlate the obscurely published or unpublished local evidence.

Other General Series publications include:

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